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Upper Intermediate Student’s Book

Life

2.33

Everyone would like to remember more but would it actually make us any happier?

I want to tell you the story of a 41-year-old woman from California known in medical literature as ‘AJ,’ who remembers almost every day of her life since the age of 11. She remembers that at 12:34 p.m. on Sunday, the 3rd of August 1986, a young man she was attracted to called her on the telephone. She remembers that on the 28th of March 1992, she had lunch with her father at the Beverly Hills Hotel. It’s a bit like certain smells that evoke strong memories … AJ’s memory is stimulated in the most intense way by dates.

You’d think that being able to retrieve facts and knowledge in this way would make us more confident and wiser. But in fact for AJ an incredible memory is as much a burden as it is a benefit. That’s because most memories are selective: they remember mostly important things and mostly good things too. AJ remembers every detail good or bad, important or not.

So when we curse our poor memories for forgetting to send a birthday card, actually we should be grateful also for all the things that our memories hide away because they don’t need to be remembered or thought about. Umm … technology of course helps us with this. We don’t need to remember the precise content of a report or the exact time of a meeting, because it’s stored on our computer or in our mobile phone.

But interestingly, the growth of this technology – what psychologists call our external memory – is having an effect on what and how much we remember. Even our memories of happy events – like parties or holidays – get stored in photo albums on our computers. So our internal memories are probably worse than those of people 100 years ago. Medical science is trying to address the problem of poor memory and this is what I want to talk about next …